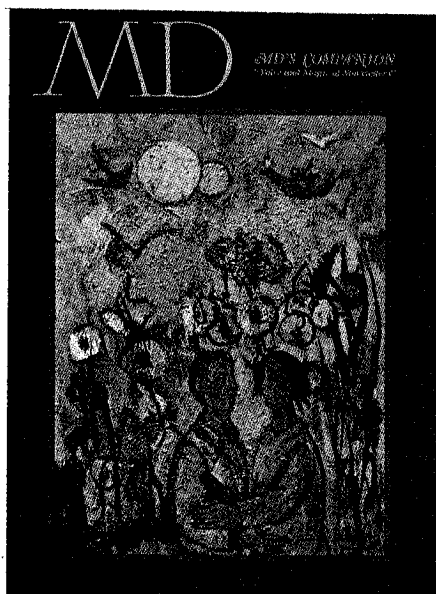


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"THERE ARE FLOWERS IN MY GARDEN" WAS PAINTED BY THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ARTIST FRANK KLEINHOLZ IN 1964. IN THE COLLECTION OF VERA SABELLE. PHOTOGRAPHED BY TED BERGMAN.

BPA

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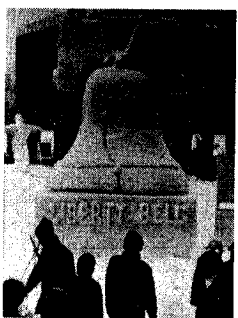
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JACK RITCHIE

Familiar to mystery fans both here and abroad, Jack Ritchie's short stories have been consistently selected for the Best Detective Stories of the year, as well as for other collections, magazines and journals. Several have been adapted for television and cinema. With his wife Rita, who is also a writer, he lives in Wisconsin.

The Many-Flavored Crime

There it is," Gerald Vanderveer said.

Ah, yes. There it was. A bathtub full of jello. Basically red, but with occasional streaks of green, yellow, and orange.

"When did you first notice this?" I asked.

"When I went to the bathroom this morning."

"What time did you go to bed last night?"

"About ten."

I nodded sagely. "Evidently someone sneaked past you last night while you were sleeping. You didn't hear water running, did you?"

"No. I'm a rather heavy sleeper."

Gerald's brother, Colonel Frank Vanderveer, appeared at the bathroom door, his face a bit pale. "Milstead has been stabbed. He's dead. In my dressing room."

I frowned. "Who's Milstead?"

"The butler," Gerald said.

We followed Colonel Vanderveer to his rooms.

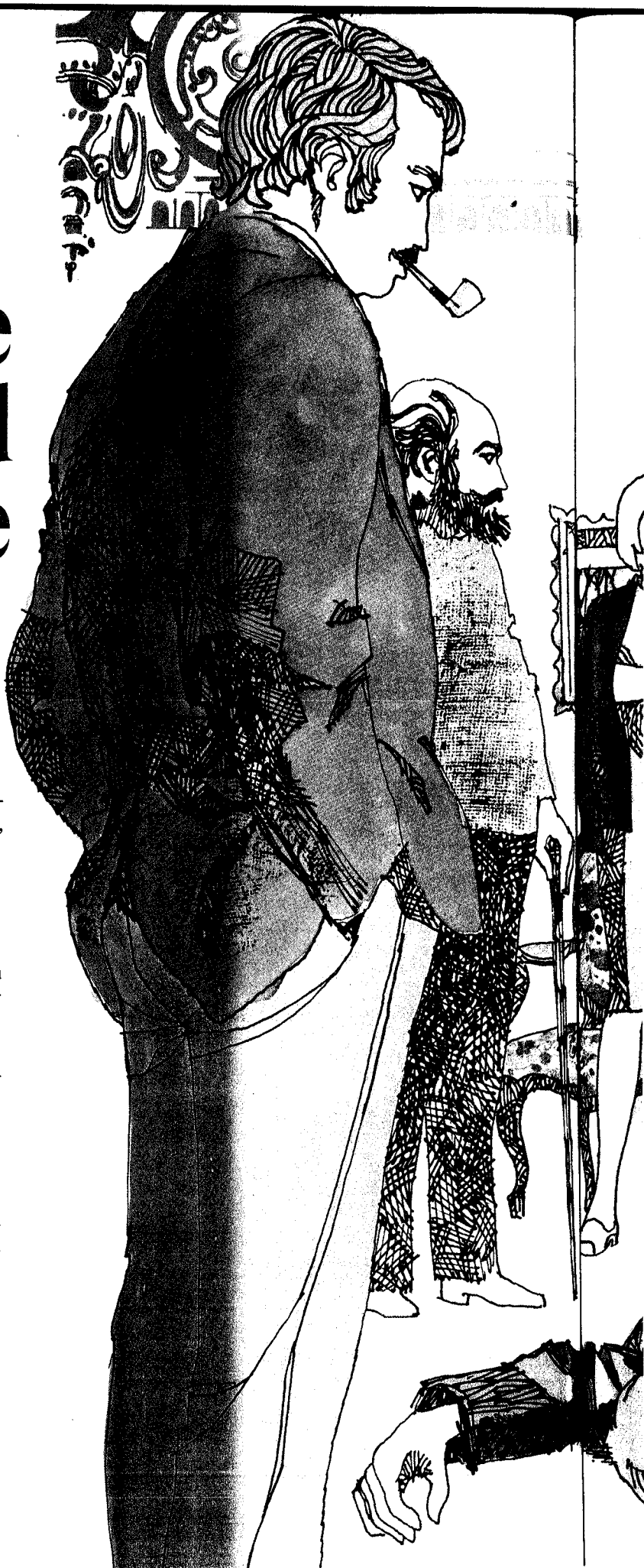
A middle-aged man in a maroon smoking jacket lay at the foot of the tall windows. He appeared to have been stabbed in the back. A knife lay beside the body.

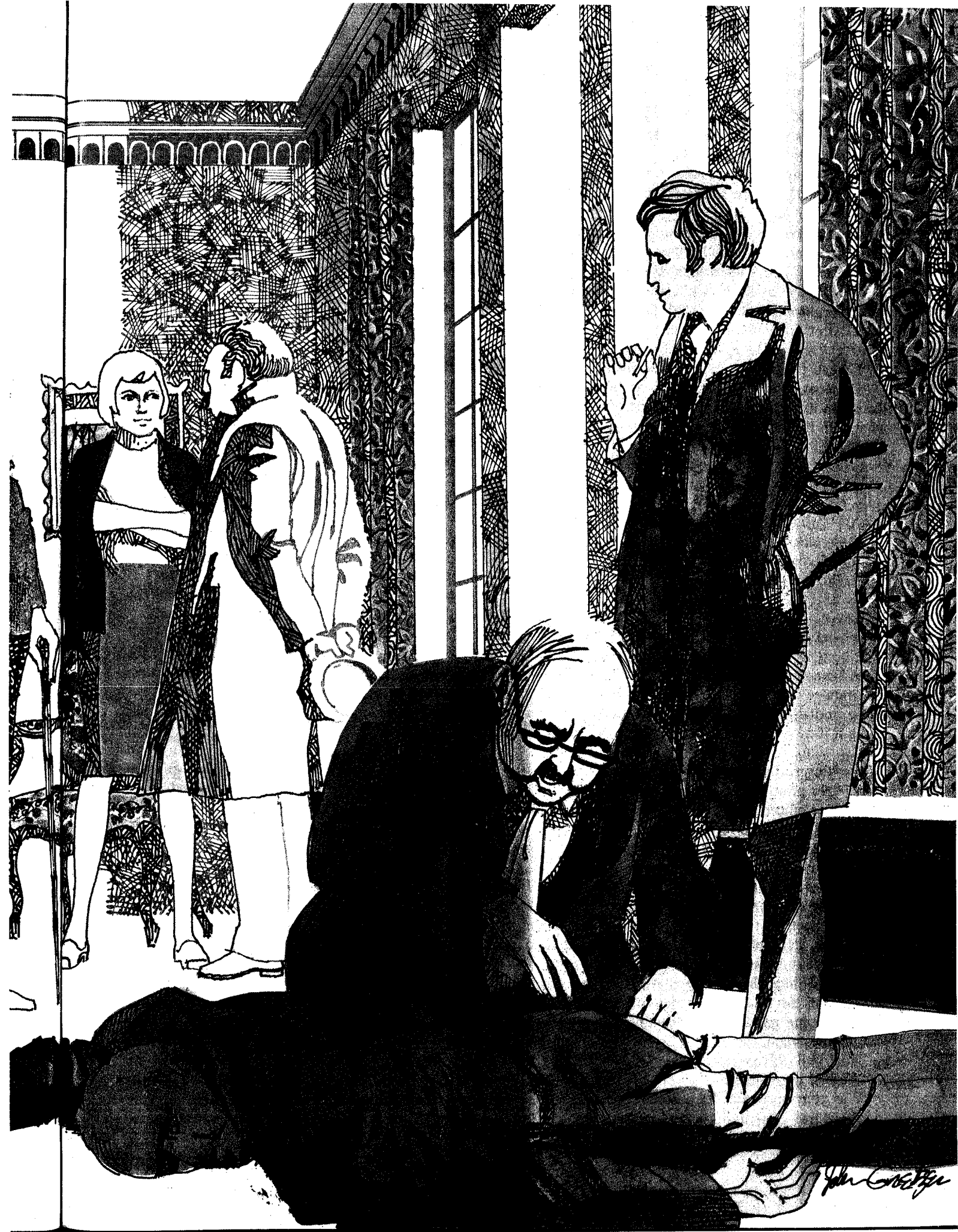
The colonel and Gerald looked at me for leadership. After all, I was a private detective.

I rose to the occasion. "I think we'd better call the police."

When the police arrived, a Lieutenant Tatum seemed to be in charge.

He studied me. "You say you're a private detective?"





I nodded. "However, I promise not to interfere. You work your side of the street, so to speak, and I'll work mine. I'm here to investigate the jello."

Gerald hastened to explain. "Someone has been putting jello into my things. Monday it was the washbasin. Tuesday the toilet. And today the bathtub. I finally decided to hire a private detective to get to the bottom of this."

Tatum strode to the bathroom door and looked. "I'll be damned," he said. Then he shrugged and came back. "Who knows about this?"

"Everybody in the house," I said. "The colonel here, his brother Gerald, and Gerald's daughter, Kitti. After all, you can't have a whole bathtub of jello . . ."

"I mean the murder," the lieutenant snapped.

"Oh, that. Well, I didn't allow anybody to enter this room, but I suppose the news has gotten around, what with the sirens and all."

Two white-coated attendants put Milstead's body on a stretcher. They covered it thoroughly with a sheet and carried it out.

Gerald had been watching them. "Frank," he said to his brother, "Isn't Milstead wearing your smoking jacket?"

Colonel Vanderveer nodded. "Yes. I caught him wearing it several months ago and it turned out that when I was gone he often liked to put on the jacket and indulge in the private fantasy that he owned this house and the grounds. Told him to keep right on doing it if he wanted to. Seemed harmless enough to me."

The fingerprint man raised his head from his work. "No prints on the knife."

A police officer brought in Mrs. Milstead, a somewhat sturdy woman with dry, narrow eyes.

"Mrs. Milstead," Lieutenant Tatum said, "I'm afraid I have some bad news for you."

Her eyes went to the dark spot on the rug. "I know. One of the maids told me that he was dead."

Tatum seemed to wait for tears, but when there were none, he continued. "When was the last time you saw your husband?"

"Around three this afternoon when we had a cup of coffee in the kitchen with the cook. After that I went shopping and did some visiting. I got back a few minutes ago."

"How well did you and your husband get along?"

"We had our arguments. Everybody knows that."

"Was your husband's life insured?"

"Of course. Twenty-five thousand dollars."

"Isn't that a pretty big amount?"

She disagreed. "Not for these days. I tried to get him to take out more, but he was stubborn."

"Do you have any idea who might want to murder your husband?"

"No. Maybe it was just another one of those accidents?"

"Accidents?"

Her eyes went to Colonel Vanderveer. "The colonel was almost killed by an arrow last week. It missed him by just a few inches. And then on Wednesday a flowerpot fell—or was *pushed*—from a third story window just as he was passing below. If he'd been hit, it certainly would have killed him."

Gerald now nodded somewhat reluctantly. "Also yesterday somebody tampered with the brakes of my brother's car. Disconnected them, or whatever people do in a situation like that."

Tatum turned to the colonel. "You had an automobile accident?"

Colonel Vanderveer shook his head. "Actually no. Kitti—that's my niece and Gerald's daughter—happened to borrow my car. She ran into a tree."

"Was she hurt?"

"No. Just shaken up a bit."

Tatum returned to Mrs. Milstead. "You think that your husband's murder was an accident?"

She shrugged. "It happened right here in the colonel's dressing room, didn't it?"

"Yes."

"My husband is about the same size as the colonel, isn't he?"

"I suppose so."

"I heard my husband was stabbed in the back. Right?"

"Right."

"So the killer didn't get a look at his face, did he?"

"Possibly not."

She smiled grimly. "My husband had his back to the killer. Maybe the light was bad. The killer thought my husband was the colonel and stabbed him."

I cleared my throat. "Could anyone here tell me where I might find a yardstick or a foot ruler?"

Tatum stared at me.

"I'm going to measure the bathtub," I said. "Length, width, depth. That sort of thing. One can't be too thorough, you know."

"There ought to be a ruler in that desk over there," Colonel Vanderveer said.

I found the ruler, went into the bathroom, and

measured the tub. When I returned to the main room, Mrs. Milstead had been dismissed.

Tatum now questioned the colonel. "You are retired from the army?"

Vanderveer touched his brush mustache. "Quartermaster Corps. As a humanitarian, I tried mightily, but vainly, to eliminate creamed chipped beef on toast from the breakfast menu."

"Tell me about those accidents. What about the arrow?"

"Nothing much to tell. I was taking a stroll about the grounds when it shot out of the woods and struck a tree near me. Undoubtedly a stray arrow. The boys from Esterville often go hunting in the woods and have very little idea of property lines."

"And the flowerpot that almost killed you?"

"It missed me by at least six feet. A sudden gust of wind must have blown it off that window ledge."

"The auto accident?"

"Brakes *do* fail."

"Then you don't believe that someone has been trying to kill you?"

"I refuse even to consider such a thing," Colonel Vanderveer said firmly.

"In the event of your death, who gets your estate?"

"My brother Gerald."

"How much is it worth?"

The colonel shrugged. "Approximately four million."

Gerald nodded. "On the other hand, I haven't a cent to my name."

"Just one of those things," Colonel Vanderveer said. "Gerald and I both started out with the same modest inheritance. I joined the army and left all of my financial affairs in the hands of a trusted family lawyer. He made me rich. Gerald chose to personally supervise the investment of every bit of his capital. Lost everything."

Gerald smiled happily. "However my brother provides generously for me and mine. I might just as well be rich, for all that it actually matters. And I pay no taxes."

I had been doing some arithmetic on a page of my notebook. "Could you tell me where I might find the kitchen?"

Gerald gave me the directions and I found Mrs. Milstead alone having a cup of coffee.

"May I have a look at your jello?" I asked. "If there is any left, of course."

She regarded me without enthusiasm and then led me to a small storeroom. She unlocked the door with a key and eyed the shelves. "We've got four boxes of jello. Two lemon, one wild cherry, and one black raspberry."

"Might I examine one of them?"

"Which one?"

"Black raspberry. It's my favorite."

She handed me the box.

I read the directions and other data on the package carefully. "Why do you suppose your husband was wearing the colonel's smoking jacket when he was killed?"

"I don't know," she said. "Suppose you tell me?"

I decided to protect Milstead's private fantasy, even though he was now dead. "I haven't the faintest idea." I studied the package of jello again. "Black raspberry. My neighborhood supermarket always seems to be out."

"Keep it," she said. "It's on the house."

I returned to the colonel's rooms.

Tatum was now questioning Kitti Vanderveer.

She was rather tall and slim, with coal black hair and equally dark eyes.

"Exactly what happened with the car?" Tatum asked.

"I was going to drive to town," Kitti said, "but I'd been having trouble with my own car, so I asked Uncle Frank if I might borrow one of his. He said yes, of course. As I neared the end of our drive, I stepped on the brakes to slow down for the turn onto the highway, only there weren't any brakes. I couldn't see just shooting out onto the highway into the path of some oncoming car, so I turned off the driveway and ran into a tree instead. Luckily I was only shaken up. As it was, though, the garage man estimated the damage to the car at one hundred and twenty-five dollars."

"You suspect that somebody tampered with the brakes?"

"Well . . . wouldn't you? In view of all of the other things—the flowerpot and the arrow, you know."

After Tatum finished questioning her, I followed her downstairs. "When you got into your uncle's car, was it parked in the driveway or was it in the garage?"

"In the garage."

"After you finished backing the car out, didn't you have to apply the brakes to stop the backward momentum? Why didn't the brakes fail at that particular point?"

She thought that over for a few moments and then brightened. "Actually the car had been put away by *backing* it into the garage. All I had to do was get inside and move *forwards*."

"There is the matter of the damage to your un-

cle's car," I said. "I believe you mentioned the sum of one hundred and twenty-five dollars?"

"Well?"

I rubbed my jaw speculatively. "Considering the fragility of the modern automobile body, it seems miraculous that you could hit a tree and incur damage of only one hundred and twenty-five dollars. Even if you hit a stationary object at only five miles per hour—and I'm certain you must have been going faster than that—the average damage to the average car is in the neighborhood of *three* hundred and thirty dollars."

She laughed quickly. "Did I say *one* hundred? I meant to say *four* hundred and twenty-five dollars. Merely a slip of the tongue."

I shook my head. "I suppose it would be a relatively simple matter to phone your garage and find out *exactly* how much the damage to your uncle's car really is? And while I'm at it, I could ask if the garage had to do any work on the brakes? After all, they were supposed to have been disconnected or something."

We were jointly silent while she did some furious thinking.

Finally I said, "No one tampered with the brakes at all, now did they? You simply got into your uncle's car and deliberately ran into a tree?"

Reluctantly she fell back on the truth. "Actually I ran into the tree twice. The first time I chickened out at the last moment and barely touched the tree at all. So I had to back up a few yards and give it another try."

"But why?"

She sighed. "Well, there had been those two previous attempts on the colonel's life, and I didn't want him to think that *I* might be responsible for them. So I thought that if I could arrange things to *look* as though another attempt had been made on his life, but that I had accidentally stepped into his place all unknowingly, then he would think that I couldn't possibly be the one who was trying to kill him since I certainly wouldn't step into my own trap, now would I?"

I almost asked her to repeat that last sentence, but then decided against it. "Do you have any bows and arrows in the house?"

"I think there's a set somewhere in one of the attic storerooms."

"Are you any good at archery?"

"No. As a matter of fact, none of us is at all good at the sport, except for Colonel Frank."

I went back upstairs to the colonel's room.

I smiled. "How many boxes of jello do you suppose are necessary to properly gelatinize the water

in a bathtub?"

Everyone in the room—especially Lieutenant Tatum—stared at me, and obviously none of them knew the answer.

I supplied it. "It would require approximately 1,080 boxes of jello to make the project a firm success. Give or take a dozen."

Tatum seemed to look up at the ceiling. "Is that the family-size box or the regular?"

"The regular. And in the mass, that would be about five and one-half cubic feet of boxes. Actually the jello *itself* would be considerably less in volume. You know how deceptive packaging is these days." I turned to Colonel Vanderveer. "Do you have a local phone directory?"

He pointed to the phone on a small table next to the wall.

I opened the thin volume and turned to its half a dozen yellow pages. I discovered that Esterville had only two supermarkets. I dialed the number of the first and asked to speak to the manager.

Lieutenant Tatum watched me, his head cocked slightly to one side. It was difficult to gauge his expression. Possibly professional awe?

When the supermarket manager came to the phone, I said, "Have you recently—within the last few days—had anyone purchase an inordinately large amount of jello?"

I almost heard him nod. "Now that you bring it up, it happened just yesterday. Bought us out completely. Had to send to the warehouse for emergency replacements."

"Ah," I said, "Did you by any chance get his or her license number?"

"License number? Why should I get his or her license number?"

That was a bit of a disappointment. "Could you perhaps give me a description of the purchaser?"

"I suppose I could. But wouldn't it be easier just to give you his name?"

"Well . . . yes."

"It was Mr. Vanderveer. Not the colonel. The other one. Gerald. Polite, friendly type person."

I hung up and stared severely at Gerald Vanderveer. "*You* purchased the jello!"

He flushed slightly. "Well, my brother simply would not face up to the fact that *someone* was trying to kill him. He refused to bring in the regular police or even a private detective to investigate the matter. So I concocted the jello scheme for the sole purpose of introducing someone competent into the house—ostensibly to solve the jello business, but actually to find out who was making these attempts on Frank's life. I was going to tell you about that later,

but frankly I wanted to see how and *if* you operated and . . ."

Lieutenant Tatum interrupted. "Well, well, so you wrapped up the Jolly Jello Caper. Congratulations. Now I don't suppose you could do the same for the murder of Milstead?"

I pondered a moment. "Perhaps a few suggestions?"

"Be my guest."

"You might see if there are any fingerprints on that broken flowerpot."

He blinked and recovered. "It's probably scattered all over the town dump by now."

"Possibly. But on the other hand, broken flowerpots are tremendously useful as drainage material. No gardener could possibly think of just throwing them away. I would imagine that the colonel's gardener might have rescued the pieces for that very purpose." I smiled cheerfully. "As a matter of fact, there is such a shortage of broken flowerpots that some people actually take perfectly sound pots and break them just so they will have shards for drainage."

For some reason Tatum glared at me and then sent off one of his men.

"Also you might check the archery equipment in one of the storage rooms in the attic," I said. "You might find fingerprints on the bow up there."

He sent another man off.

We waited until both of them returned and handed their items over to the fingerprint man.

Tatum still glowered. "Anything else?"

I nodded. "Let us suppose for a few moments that the attempts on the colonel's life were not really genuine. That is, they were meant to fail."

Tatum now frowned. "Dropping a flowerpot on the colonel wasn't an attempt on his life?"

"As he says, it missed him by a good six feet."

"What about the brake tampering? And that damn arrow?"

I evaded the brake episode. "You have been assuming that the archer *inadvertently* missed his target. But suppose he did it deliberately?"

"The arrow came within inches of the colonel. It would have taken an expert archer to do something like that."

"Either an expert or simply a bad archer who got closer than he intended."

"What about Milstead's murder?" Tatum demanded. "There was no miss there."

"You are assuming that Milstead was killed by

mistake and that the colonel was really the intended victim. But suppose Milstead was actually killed for himself alone and that *all* of the other incidents were concocted solely for the purpose of making us think that Milstead's death had been just another attempt on the colonel's life, once again bungled."

The fingerprint man looked up. "I'm getting matching prints on the flowerpot pieces and the bow."

I carefully removed the package of black raspberry jello from my pocket and handed it to the fingerprint man. "You'll find my prints on this and Mrs. Milstead's. Hers ought to match those on the bow and the pot shards."

I looked about the silent room and smiled. "Mrs. Milstead claimed that the last time she saw her husband alive was at three o'clock in the kitchen. Obviously Milstead wasn't wearing the colonel's smoking jacket at the time, since that was a secret thing with him. And yet Mrs. Milstead *knew* that her husband was wearing that smoking jacket when he was killed. Only the murderer could have known that."

Tatum frowned. "She might have seen the body being carried out on the stretcher."

"No. It was completely covered with a sheet when it left this room."

His frown deepened. "I don't remember Mrs. Milstead saying that she knew her husband was wearing the smoking jacket at the time of his death."

I cleared my throat. "When I spoke to her in the kitchen and told her about her husband wearing the colonel's jacket at the time of his death, she merely *nodded*—which indicates clearly to me that she knew he was wearing the jacket at the time of his death and, as I said, only the murderer could have known that. If she *hadn't* known anything about the jacket, she would have been surprised enough to at least say 'Huh?'."

Tatum seemed to have trouble speaking. "You mean to tell me that you're building your whole case on the fact that she didn't say 'Huh?' when you thought she was supposed to?"

"Well . . . yes. I imagine she killed him for the twenty-five thousand dollar life insurance."

There was an utter silence. Actually rather long.

Finally the fingerprint man spoke up. "The prints on the pot, the bow, and the box of jello match. I guess it really is this Mrs. Milstead."

Lieutenant Tatum looked at me.

I had the strangest feeling that he wanted to cry.

But instead he went to the door and spoke to one of his men. "Send Mrs. Milstead up here. I want to ask her a few more questions."

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